

## *Mourners*

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Professor Emeritus Jake Freeman cramped the wheel of his old Buick hard right and swung off the interstate. He'd almost missed the highway marker with its crisp white letters: *Rivercrest 8*. It had been many years since he'd passed this way and, although he felt confident about the route, the sign with its directional arrow reassured him. Jake had turned sixty-five, and his eyesight, still good, wasn't what it once was.

Jake Freeman had a professorial mien about him; abundant, brushed back gray-white hair, a neatly trimmed beard, inquisitive brown eyes set above an aquiline nose, and slightly protruding ears his college sweetheart, Marcie Durham, had once characterized as *elf-like*. A pleasant looking man, blessed with a warm smile, six feet tall, and still slim, he had also been endowed with a crisp and audible voice that projected well in the lecture hall. Although his teaching days lay behind, he continued to favor chinos and corduroy jackets of the sort he'd regularly worn in the classroom.

As do many older men, he liked to think he was still his younger self, simply inhabiting an aging body. But aging that body surely was; a band of wrinkles, faint but noticeable, trailed across his forehead, and webs of intersecting cusps and serifs inscribed the backs of his hands. And, although his doctor regularly commended his good health, Jake could recite a catalogue of lesser aches and pains. Nonetheless, whatever ailments might plague him, his mind stayed lamp bright.

And memory transported him across the elastic space of time to when he and Marcie were both in their early twenties. In that sense, he truly was a younger man inhabiting an older body. Today and yesterday blended together as one.

Clear of the interstate, he slowed to fifty, and then to forty. He encountered almost no traffic on the two lane blacktop. To his left and mostly parallel to the road, the Teal River flowed east and then, after twenty miles or so, would turn south. Breaking through tissue-like clouds, the thin October sun cast a glare on the water. The surface of the Teal seemed placid, easy going. But Jake remembered that, when he was a boy, the river, when fed by melting spring snow packs, would sometimes surge up to display its otherwise inchoate power and inundate everything and everyone along its banks.

Richly tinted foliage had already begun its autumnal descent, but abundant walls of reds, browns, and yellows persisted on both sides of the road. Fall had been Marcie's favorite time of year. Jake had dismissed the possibility it would happen—so many years had passed—nonetheless, like the onset of some physical malady, paroxysms of nostalgia clutched at his chest and throat as he approached the hometown of his youth. He was bound for the Restwell Cemetery; the notion of going there had absorbed him ever since he learned of Marcie's death several weeks before. But, once there, to do what—to pay his respects at her grave? To mourn? Such formulations seemed pedestrian, superficial. He could find no words to express the emotions that beset him. It meant more, so much more.

Marcie had been his brown-eyed girl. She had always remained in his heart; something he could neither suppress nor make go away.

Now, as he approached his ending years, the news of her death created within him a reawakening of loss and grief, an inexplicable need. He had to go. He had hoped to see her once more in life. Why had he failed so many times to pick up the phone or to send a letter or e-mail? Now, those opportunities gone, he could only try to say goodbye.

On the outskirts of town Jake pulled into the Riverview Restaurant, as much to collect his thoughts as to eat lunch. Seated at a window table, he watched the river drift by; now and then it bounced white glimmers of sunlight his way. They seemed like the flashes of small explosions on the water. He felt he ought to eat something and so nibbled on a corned beef sandwich. But the hunger he'd experienced earlier in the day had vanished and he abandoned the effort. Jake asked the waitress, a pouty, snub-nosed blonde with penciled eyebrows, where he might find a florist. She told him she felt pretty certain there was a flower shop on River Street. She didn't probe, but he sensed she thought it a curious question from someone just passing through.

"I'm on my way to Chicago," Jake volunteered. "I grew up here. Thought I'd stop by and visit the cemetery. Some family members are buried there."

"I'm not from around here myself," the waitress said. "I guess I wouldn't know any of the names." She exuded disinterest and apparent dissatisfaction with her lot in life.

"I guess not," Jake said. He deposited some money on the table, stopped in the restroom, and went out across the graveled lot to his car.

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River Street, the town's principal thoroughfare, initially seemed much as he remembered it. It struck Jake, however, that a kind of

wannabe yuppiness embraced the place. The former post office now housed a bank; the old after school hangout, Maxie's Malt Shop, had been rechristened as Ferrgie's; four or five boutique shops of one sort or another had sprung up; and for two blocks the city fathers had installed parking meters.

He parked the car, retrieved some quarters from the glove box, inserted them in a balky meter, and set off down the sidewalk. It seemed peculiar that no one recognized him. It was, after all, the place where store proprietors had once waved to him from windows; where people had greeted him on this street. In those days, everyone knew the Freeman kid. Now, like a disoriented time traveler, he felt himself a stranger.

Jake easily located the florist, Fiona's Flower Fashions. Why did these places always have such cutesy names? When he pushed open the door, a tiny bell tinkled. Alerted by the tintinnabulation, a dark-haired, young woman looked up from a work table where she was watering a selection of orchids. She had on a gardening apron and wore work gloves.

The woman delivered an obligatory smile, artificial as the floral arrangements featured in the display cabinet behind her. "Good morning. Beautiful day isn't it?" Indeed, the sun had mostly escaped its fleeting cloud cover, and the air outside was clear and invigorating.

"Yes. Very nice. I need some flowers for the cemetery, but I'm not sure what would do."

"Is it for a container stand or...?"

"I'm not certain. I guess I really don't know."

"I'm afraid it's a little late in the season for a plant, although perhaps some geraniums or mums would be..."

“Maybe just some cut flowers. Do you have roses?” He’d once given Marcie roses on her birthday. She had rewarded him with a long-lasting, close embrace of a sort that troubled her watching mother. Jake smiled at the remembering.

“I don’t think they’ll last; the nights are already quite chilly. Perhaps you’d rather present a memorial bouquet to one of our churches. Was the death a recent one? We have a very complete record of our floral memorials. If you’d care to give me the name I could check our files.”

“No thank you. I’ll take them with me.” He envisioned the gesture as a personal—and private—one.

“Was the person who passed a relative?” She continued to poke about.

“No. Not a relative.” More than a relative, he thought. Much more than a relative.

The clerk asked no further questions. While she inserted the flowers in a plastic sheath, she said, “Just go up four blocks to Chestnut and turn right. The road kind of winds around up to the heights. Maybe ten minutes. Real pretty. More like a park than a graveyard.”

Chestnut Street metamorphosed into Chestnut Road and carried Jake and the Buick up a meandering course through a prosperous section of the town, one featuring ostentatious homes perched smugly on ostentatious and well-manicured grounds. Not where Jake had grown up. His car idling at a stop sign, Jake noticed the sun had fully broken through. It painted shadowed outlines of tree limbs and leaves onto the road and onto bare patches of ground. His mind drifted on waves of memory. A muffled honk from a car behind encouraged him to move along.

Emerging from a wooded area, mostly old oaks, he came up to the cemetery gate. As the clerk had predicted, it had taken ten minutes. He glanced back and let his eyes travel down the slope and then sweep across the panorama of the Teal River Valley in peak color autumn dress, its natural beauty enhanced as the hills caught multiple shafts of sunlight. How many times had he and Marcie parked on a nearby bluff and looked out over that same valley? Gone to watch the submarine races: that's what he told his pals. It always got a laugh.

Chestnut Road ended in a cul-de-sac. Directly ahead a wrought iron gate stood open, providing cemetery access through a low stone wall. Jake drove in and parked in a visitor's space in front of a garage-like building that apparently doubled as work shed and office. He saw no other cars. Jake hoped he'd find someone there, perhaps a caretaker. He would need help to locate the grave site.

He stepped into a small vestibule and called out. "Anyone here?"

"I'm in here. In the office. Straight ahead." A man's voice wafted out through an open door. "Come on in."

A thick-set, bespectacled man dressed in gabardine slacks and an open necked dress shirt stood up from behind a desk. "Hi. I'm Bob Driscoll. I'm the manager. Well, part time." He exhibited a nervous, over-eager demeanor. "I do it all—keep the books, cut the grass, even dig the graves when the hired hands don't show up. Just catching up on some accounts. How can I help you?"

"My name is Freeman. Jake Freeman. I'm looking for a grave site. I was hoping you could help me. Marcie Bradford. I think the burial was a month or so ago."

"You a relative, Mr. Freeman?" Everyone asked the same question.

"No. I was... I was a friend. We were in school together. It was a long time ago."

Driscoll spread open a ledger with handwritten entries. He removed his glasses and leaned down to study the last page. Lifting his head, he said, "Here it is—lot 372. Marcie Bradford. I remember her. I mean while she was alive, of course. Nice lady."

"Yes, I expect she was a nice lady." Nice? More than nice. She was sweet and gentle and smart and pretty and talented and petite and sexy and, yes, nice.

"You can drive over there. Go straight past that clump of elms. It's just across from the Memorial Garden. That's for vets. Special honors you know."

"That's good. Good they're honored."

"I can go with you if you like."

"No. But thank you. I'm sure I'll find it." Jake used the facility's rest room, went back out to the car, and drove the fifty yards or so the Memorial Garden. He thought about walking, but he'd been having lower back pains that rippled down to his legs. He still played tennis, but sometimes walking became hobbling. Better to drive.

He should have realized the graves did not actually display numbers. But he had a good idea where to look. He picked his way among the graves in a gingerly manner like that he employed as a young Marine in Vietnam stepping through suspected minefields. He wasn't a particularly reverent person, yet somehow it seemed disrespectful to step directly on someone's grave. It soon dawned on him, however, the occupants really didn't care, and for the first time that day he smiled and even chuckled. Here and there he spotted fresh

flowers. But, untended by truant minders, most of the floral memorials, like the cemetery residents, were deceased.

The cemetery had already commanded the hilltop for a long time when Jake was a boy. Crumbling and hard to decipher, some of the markers had become layered with moss, moist and thick. The newer polished stone markers—red brown, gray, and black—stood erect, like sentries on permanent watch. Others markers, barely discernible rectangles, lay flush with the ground. A few grave stones had photos, those of children especially touching. The inscriptions for former military people captured Jake's interest. They invariably indicated the deceased person's branch and dates of service—seemingly the most significant chapter of their lives, like assertions etched in stone that those lives had meaning. All in all, Jake took pleasure in the serenity and stillness of the place.

Marcie's grave, in fact, turned out to be easy to find. Although the ground had settled and fresh sod had been tamped into place, the sharply defined outline of the excavation persisted. Moreover the low granite headstone had not yet yielded to opportunity grabbing weeds or overlong grass. Jake read the chiseled inscription through the soft filter of dappled sunlight. *Marcie Bradford 1945–2008. Beloved Mother.* That was it. Nothing more.

The wind had freshened and the dry foliage on the oaks and elms that lived among the dead rattled in a kind of autumnal dirge. Here and there birds chirruped—omnipresent chickadees. Jake stood silently staring at the stone and clutching the roses before him in two hands. He had feared he might weep; something he'd been inclined to do of late. But no tears came. Where was she? Nothing more than



a head stone and a pathetically small grass plot. Not a religious man, Jake experienced no spiritual presence; only memories. Life, it seemed, consisted of nothing but insubstantial memories and of unrealized dreams. Jake knelt, removed the flowers from their wrapper, and placed them on the grave below the headstone. *I never stopped loving you, Marcie.* The words passed silently and repeatedly through his mind, as if he were speaking directly to her. *Never.*

Thus preoccupied he failed to sense the presence of someone who had come up behind him. “Who are you? And what are you doing at my mother’s grave? The speaker, a good looking man, perhaps in his early forties, considered Jake with suspicion and, it seemed, incipient hostility. Tall, with medium length hair, he had on jeans, a dark pullover sweater, and a light blue wind breaker. He carried a plastic watering can in one hand.

For a moment Jake remained mute, briefly immobilized by a situation he had not anticipated and for which he had not prepared. His startled mind raced.

“Who are you?” the man again demanded. He spoke with all the authority and confidence of an official who’d chanced upon an in-progress crime.

Jake got to his feet. “Freeman. My name is Freeman. Someone sent me the obituary...I was going to Chicago, I...” Jake knew he likely made no sense so far as the man was concerned.

“I still don’t know what...”

“Did you say you are her son?” Jake sought confirmation.

“Yes. I’m Mark Bradford.”

Jake, ordinarily an articulate man, searched for words. “I was a friend of your mother—many years ago. I stopped to pay my respects. I...”

Bradford seemed unsatisfied with Jake's explanation. He scrutinized Jake's face, as if trying to recall having seen it before. He paused and then after a long silence said, "You said your name was Freeman? Is it Jack, or maybe Jake, Freeman?"

"Why yes."

"That's it. I thought so. Hell of a lot older. And a beard. But you're the one in the picture."

"I'm afraid I don't..." Jake felt like someone picked out of a police lineup.

"We were going through a box my mother kept in a cedar chest in an upstairs closet. Came across a photo. I guess you must have been in Vietnam."

"Yes. Marines." A photo? What else might there be? "We sent pictures home to our classmates, I suppose. Helped us feel connected."

Bradford gave him a questioning look, a dubious look. "There were letters, too. Your letters. You must have been *pretty good* friends." He smiled indulgently. Like a prosecutor who had just produced a piece of surprise evidence, Bradford seemed inclined to winkle it out of him.

It had to be difficult for him. People don't want to believe there ever was anyone other than their own mother or father in a parent's life. Even if it happened long ago, it somehow makes the parent seem disloyal; the other person surely an intruder.

"Yes. We were close. But that was before she ever met Tom Bradford."

"Did you know my father?" Bradford asked. He appeared to be uncomfortable but, at the same time, intrigued by the direction their conversation was taking.

“No. And I was gone when they got married.”

However indirectly the event might be alluded to, the sense of devastation that had engulfed Jake when Marcie turned away still lingered. Did the pain show in his eyes?

“I think she’d been looking at those letters,” Bradford said. “They were kind of spread out.”

“Those letters would be decades old. She was probably just cleaning things out. I hadn’t seen your mother in more than forty years.” Jake, however, failed to add that he had carefully preserved and nurtured her memory for all of those forty years. It was a selective truth telling.

“I guess this is awkward for you,” Bradford said. “I know it is for me.”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

“You must have felt pretty strongly—or you wouldn’t have come here.”

Jake did not respond to Bradford’s words. He said simply, “I’d best be on my way. I apologize if my coming here disturbed you.” Jake started to walk away.

“No. Don’t go. Tell me more about her. About when she was young, I mean.”

Did he really want to learn more about his mother or simply to dig for more on her relationship with Jake?

“Oh, I don’t think...”

“Mr. Freeman, my mother was a great woman; and she had a full life. And my kid brother and I were always part of it. But for some reason she never talked much about when she was younger. Neither

did my grandparents when they were alive." He gestured. "They're buried right over there. I guess there has always been a kind of blank before she married my dad. He never said much either."

"Perhaps we can sit on that bench," Jake said. "I'm afraid my back is playing some unpleasant tricks. I need to rest it for a bit."

And so the two men, each suspicious of the other's purpose, settled stiffly side by side on a concrete and wood bench dedicated to one of River Crest's departed citizens. For a time they sat without speaking, like strangers at a bus stop, staring at their shoe tops. In time the sun warmed them and seemed to diminish the tension between them, to put them more at ease.

A stout man outfitted in a hooded jacket and a baseball cap passed by towed along by two Labs straining at their leashes. He glanced at the men on the bench with puzzled geniality. "Hi, Mark," he called out.

Bradford returned the greeting, and the man went on.

"One of my neighbors. Always nosing around like his dogs. I'll bet he was trying to figure out what we're doing here," Bradford said. And, for the first time since they took to the bench, he smiled.

Before Bradford could ask a question, Jake asked one of his own. "What happened to your father?" Living in California and for a time in Europe, Jake had lost track of the Bradford family for several years, and wasn't even certain where they had lived.

"Dad was a Chicago lawyer—and a damned good one. He had a heart attack when I was eleven. No history. No warning. Coaching at my Little League game one day and gone the next. Mom brought us back here and raised us."

Jake drew an inference from the tone of Bradford's voice. "You really respected your mother, didn't you?"

"You bet. Always there for us. I guess that's sort of a cliché. But in her case it was true."

"I'm not surprised," Jake said.

"She worked hard, put herself through school after dad died, and sacrificed a lot for us. And she was interested in things. I guess it's something she shared with us."

"Your mother was much the same when she was a young woman. She hadn't gone off to college when I knew her. Her parents hadn't encouraged her. But I was certain that she eventually would. Her mind was too active to settle for some run of the mill receptionist job. She was one smart cookie."

Mark grinned. "First time I ever heard anyone call her *that*."

For a moment they became distracted by the antics of a pair of scampering squirrels, performing like furry acrobats.

Then Jake picked up where he'd left off. "Your mother was popular in high school and still had a lot of friends afterwards."

"Kind of interesting you said that. When we came back here she didn't seem to have much to do with people she knew growing up. At least that's how it seemed to me."

"Well, people drift apart and go their separate ways."

"No. It was almost like she was avoiding them. But I know that sometimes she went through her high school year book. I expect you're in there."

"Right. But I was a year ahead."

"So what happened? Between you and my mother? Why did you split up?"

Even in the prevailing circumstance, it seemed to be an all too personal question. And it caught Jake off guard, as had the event itself. He'd never known, *for certain*, why she turned away. It had been a classic Dear John letter; she was marrying someone else, and it was *for the best*. It had all happened suddenly, soon after he arrived in Danang.

"I'm too old for conceit," Jake said. "I guess your dad just swept her off her feet."

"That sounds sarcastic."

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm sure she found him attractive—good looking guy, promising job at a prominent law firm. She mentioned meeting him when I was home on leave before I shipped out for Nam. A few weeks, later she wrote to say they were to be married. End of story."

"How long were you in the picture?"

Jake considered his answer, like a judge pondering a decision.  
"Five years."

"Five years? And I'd never even heard of you?"

"People come into and go out of other people's lives, and that's all there is to it. We move on."

"Are you married, Mr. Freeman?"

"I've been a widower for five years."

"Sons? Daughters?"

"No."

"What did you do all this time?"

"Oh, mostly I've been an academic. History professor. Spent some time in a Washington think tank. A couple of stints in the government. Nothing very exciting, I'm afraid. What about yourself?"

"Attorney, like my dad. Married. Two girls." Bradford extracted his

billfold. "Here they are. Marcie's fourteen, and Jessica's twelve. Mom sure loved them."

Jake carefully examined the pictures. "Yes, I'm sure she did. They're both beautiful."

"Mom used to go to all their performances, played board games and video games with them, and took them for walks in the woods. That sort of thing. They sure miss her, even the teasing."

"Teasing?"

"She used to tell them they looked like a pair of little elves. Can't see it in the picture, but their ears stick out a little and they're kind of pointed. Mom called them *elf ears*. See, sort of like mine." Bradford lifted a hand and pointed at one of his ears.

Jake looked at the younger man's ears. They were as described.

For a moment Bradford fixed his eyes on Jake. "I guess that shape is more common than I thought," he said without elaboration.

And so they talked for another half hour. Clearly Bradford idolized the parents who raised him. Jake shared what he could about Marcie, but held back that which he could not.

What he could not share involved lingering questions and gnawing doubt which had besieged and obsessed him for all those years. After he returned to the United States from Vietnam where he had been badly wounded (and first reported dead), a friend told him Marcie had been pregnant when she married Bradford. His pride already damaged, his hopes crushed, he assumed she had betrayed him after he had shipped out. He had believed in her, never doubted her. Yet the dream disappeared, and the certainty did not survive.

Another possibility had occurred to him, of course. The child

could have been his. He'd had his suspicions but had been too bitter—and too cowardly—to pursue the possibility that, she'd sought to protect his reputation or her own by marrying someone else. And he convinced himself that if she had felt about him as he felt about her, she would not have turned away.

Hurt by Marcie's rejection and troubled by memories of Vietnam, Jake had married the nurse who tended him during his long recovery in the Balboa Naval Hospital. She was good to him and good for him. But she wasn't Marcie. He told himself over and over that it was simply the way it was meant to be. It all seemed maddeningly logical. But how could he resist feelings that were spontaneous and enduring? Time had spread no softening patina over the hurt. Rather, it had sealed an image; in his heart and in his mind, she would always be his brown-eyed girl.

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Bradford's voice interrupted his waking dream. "Mr. Freeman, I have to leave. Appointment later this afternoon. I suppose this hasn't been easy for either one of us. But I appreciate your willingness to talk to me."

"And I yours."

"I think I understand why you came. But I think it would be better if you didn't come again."

"I know."

"About those letters. I only read part of the first one. I felt it was—I don't know—kind of a violation to do more. Would you like me to send them to you, along with the picture?"

"No. Just destroy them. I know what was in them."



“You have my word.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Just one more thing, Mr. Freeman. When exactly did you leave for Vietnam?”

“It’s hard to forget. September 23, 1966. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I was just wondering.”

The two men shook hands, each with some embarrassment, and Bradford walked back to the parking area. He waved before he got into his Lexus and then drove off.

Jake sat alone on the bench for another half hour. He was wondering, too. But he was almost certain. And he suspected Mark was as well. Some things, however, were best left unsaid.

Jake stopped once more at the grave. He mumbled some words lost in the windblown rustle of dry autumn leaves. Then, through waning daylight, Jake slowly made his way toward his car, a solitary figure hobbled a bit by a bad back. ▣